

Trumka on Trump: AFL-CIO chief urges president-elect to work with unions to save capitalism

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The *New York Times* on Wednesday published an op-ed piece by Richard Trumka, the president of the US trade union organization, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

Titled “Don’t Let Trump Speak for Workers,” the comment is ostensibly a criticism of the incoming president. In reality, however, it is the latest in series of groveling statements by top union executives offering their services in suppressing working-class opposition to the savage attacks being readied by the incoming administration.

The piece takes as its starting point the lie that Trump’s America First nationalism, trade war threats against China and military and infrastructure spending proposals are all aimed at advancing the interests of American workers. Trumka argues that the new president would be far more successful if he saw the unions as “partners” rather than antagonists.

Trump has already tried a “go-it-alone strategy on behalf of American workers,” Trumka complains, pointing to how he has “browbeaten Carrier into reversing a decision to move some jobs from Indiana to Mexico.” However, “Working people do not want a savior to speak for us. We want to raise our own voices through our unions—and those voices are more essential than ever,” Trumka declares.

Workers do not have a “voice” through the unions. The interests of corrupt union executives like Trumka are diametrically opposed to those of the workers they allegedly “represent.” This does not stop him from asserting that only the unions are legally empowered to bargain away the living standards and social rights of workers.

At Carrier, “workers have elected representatives and are part of a union with real experience partnering with employers to save jobs,” Trumka declares. Indeed, the United Steelworkers (USW) has imposed repeated concessions on Carrier workers, including a multi-tier wage and benefit scheme, based on the bogus claim this would “save jobs.”

Trumka and the rest of the labor bureaucracy are concerned that the incoming administration, filled with ultra-right ideologues, will sideline and further weaken the influence of the unions. Without the assistance of the unions, he warns, Trump’s class war policies could provoke a social explosion that threatens “democratic capitalism.”

The AFL-CIO chief acknowledges that the relentless attack on workers’ living standards and the complicity of the government has discredited “democratic institutions” around the world. “When democratic capitalism is managed in ways that fail to provide good jobs, working people will turn in desperation toward authoritarian solutions,” Trumka says. “This is the great lesson of the 20th century, and we face the threat once again today.”

Trumka’s primary concern is not the danger of fascism. Trump’s promotion of economic nationalism, militarism and anti-foreigner hatred enjoys the support of large sections of the trade union bureaucracy, which would feel right at home in a neo-fascist movement as long as they could maintain their positions and privileges.

What frightens Trumka is the prospect of an anti-capitalist and socialist movement of the working class. This would pose an existential threat to the union officialdom, which has long served as a labor police force for the capitalist class and central conduit of anti-communism.

His reference to “authoritarian solutions” is in continuity with the decades-long effort of the unions to identify socialism—the struggle to liberate the working class from capitalist exploitation and establish genuine democratic control of production—with Stalinism.

Trumka personifies the upper middle class social types who advanced their careers as the unions turned themselves into anti-working class organizations and appendages of corporate management. As president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) from 1982 to 1995, he played the central role in transforming what had once been the most militant union in the United States.

More than any other individual, Trumka is personally responsible for facilitating the social counter-revolution in the mining regions of West Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and other states, which turned them into centers of opioid drug addiction and suicide.

Trumka began his career in the UMW bureaucracy as a member of the legal staff of Arnold Miller, who became president after a Labor Department-supervised election in 1972 during an upsurge of miners against the corrupt and gangster-ridden leadership of Tony Boyle.

A wave of wildcat strikes throughout the coalfields culminated in a bitter strike in 1974. This was followed by the 111-day walkout in 1977-1978, in which miners clashed with Miller and defied a back-to-work order by the Carter administration. Miller was forced to resign in 1979.

Trumka returned to work in the mines in order to accumulate the required time to run for office. After miners rebelled again, this time against the 1981 sellout agreement brought by UMW President Sam Church, Trumka won a landslide election in 1982.

Over the next 13 years, Trumka worked to break down the traditions of working class solidarity and militant struggle in the UMW and transform the union into an adjunct of the coal industry. In 1983, the UMW abandoned its traditional policy of “no contract, no work” and industry-wide strike action in favor of the policy of so-called selective strikes against individual companies.

This paved the way for the isolation and defeat of the 1984-1985 AT Massey strike and the 1989-1990 struggle at Pittston coal, which opened the way for a wave of violence by the coal companies and the state that culminated in the frame-up and murder of militant miners.

While he cowered before the coal operators and the government, Trumka used threats and physical attacks against dissident miners and other opponents, above all the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, which was fighting to mobilize all miners in a national strike to defend the Pittston strikers.

In June 1989, rank-and-file miners in southern West Virginia launched a wildcat strike to break the isolation of the Pittston workers. At its height, 50,000 miners paralyzed coal production east of the Mississippi. In response, Trumka issued a desperate plea to the coal bosses and the government, telling the *Charleston Gazette* that Pittston’s intransigence threatened to destroy the stability and competitiveness the UMW had brought to the coal industry.

If the company succeeded in breaking the UMW, he warned, “When it comes back, I think the form of union probably will be different. Its tolerance for injustice will be far less and its willingness to alibi for a system that we know doesn’t work will be nonexistent.”

Trumka conspired with the first Bush administration and Democrats like West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller to crush the wildcat and impose a sellout on the Pittston miners. Once again, the crushing of the miners’ rebellion was used to launch a corporate-government counteroffensive against the miners, culminating in the murder of West Virginia coal miner John McCoy in January 1990.

When he was elected UMW president in 1982, the union had 120,000 active members. It fell to 84,000 by time he left, and today, under his handpicked successor, Cecil Roberts, it is lucky to have 10,000 active miners as dues-paying members.

These credentials earned Trumka a top spot in the national leadership of the AFL-CIO. During his 14 years as secretary-treasurer, he was credited with founding the AFL-CIO Capital Stewardship Committee, which allowed the union hierarchy to invest billions in pension and health care funds and emerge as a significant Wall Street player.

After becoming AFL-CIO president 2009, Trumka was appointed by President Obama to the White House Economic Recovery Advisory Board, a body that included corporate executives from General Electric, Oracle and UBS. It was headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, who spearheaded the assault on workers during the Reagan years.

Over the last eight years, Trumka and the AFL-CIO have reduced work stoppages to the lowest level since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began recording figures, allowing Obama to carry out the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in US history. Trumka and the AFL-CIO are now offering their services to Trump.



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